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ABSTRACT

In 1937, teacher and educator Leonard S. Kenworthy wrote an article in which he suggested that poetry was a useful aid in teaching U.S. history. This paper reviews Kenworthy's article, including his rationale for the use of verse in teaching history, methods by which poetry could be incorporated into the curriculum and used in the classroom, and lists of historical poems that would be useful in teaching about specific historical periods. The article concludes that Kenworthy's ideas on the use of poetry remain viable for contemporary teachers. (DB)

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Historical Poetry and American History

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Historical Poetry and American History

Leonard S. Kenworthy is a name familiar to many kindergarten through twelfth grade teachers and teacher educators. For more than fifty years, his books and articles have helped teachers with ideas and activities for use in teaching the social studies. Eventually to become a Professor of Education, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, Kenworthy, in 1937, was a teacher in the Brunswick School, Greenwich, Connecticut. Out of his experiences in the Brunswick School came many ideas for the teaching of American history through the use of verse. His ideas are interesting and continue to be of use to teachers.

In "American History in Verse" Kenworthy (1937) talked about how to incorporate historical verse into American history classes. He also suggested a number of historical poems suitable for several different periods of American history.

Rationale for the Use of Verse

Kenworthy began his article with a reference to the one-room American schools of the 1850s, 60s, and 70s. On almost any morning choral singing or the group chanting of American geography could be heard coming from these classrooms. As a group, students would, in a fashion, sing or chant their way through the state capitals or other geographical information. Different versions of the same basic song were familiar to different communities. As one example,

Maine, Augusta, on the Kenebec.

New Hampshire, Concord, on the Merrimac.

Vermont, Montpelier, on the Onion River.

And so forth....

Students would repeat each line twice until they had covered the entire country.

Kenworthy mentioned how humorous these teaching strategies and techniques of the 1800s seemed to a later age. No longer was the emphasis on memorization. Strategies to promote higher levels of understanding were standard.

Yet, he asked, why couldn't the "rhythmic pleasure and factual memory" of the old-time method of choral singing and group chanting still be put to good use, only this time through the method of historical verse? Kenworthy suggested that the study of American history begged for the study of its historical verse; the use of poetry having a direct connection with the incidents and people normally studied in an American history class could have double the impact of prose alone. Kenworthy further assured teachers that the use of poetry would be only a slight variation from their usual way of teaching American history and that its introduction would not, in any way, be discreditable. In fact, the use of poetry would make American history interesting and be of profit to both students and teachers in a number of different ways.

Teachers could make choices from a plethora of materials according to Kenworthy. Poetry to describe historical places, times, events, and persons was abundant. The teacher would not have to search for the poetry, only collect and select. The teacher's goals and objectives, purposes, and method of use would determine the poems selected. The integration of historical verse with American history could be done in several ways.

Methods of Use

In some school districts, teachers could give some thought to the combination of American history and American literature into one course. To better ensure success, this method would require an especially adept teacher, generous allotments of time, and a balanced treatment of both subject areas. The use of historical poetry would be but one technique used by teachers to mesh the two subject areas together.

A less radical and more easily implemented method would be the close collaboration between history and English teachers on course syllabi. All aspects of the curriculums of the two separate courses including topics of study, assignments, activities, and tests would be coordinated so as to complement one another.

If this arrangement were not possible, then history and English teachers could simply make assignments of special topics or include the supplementary reading of poetry with historical themes as a way of generating interest in English and history while also helping to fortify in the minds of students the historical events in the development of our country.

If this method were still too time consuming or in some other way not practical, then there were yet other, more simple, albeit effective, ways of incorporating historical poetry into the American history curriculum. Teachers could include shorter units of study of historical verse as part of their history course or as part of a history club project or assembly program. Kenworthy suggested units of study on the poetical history of the United States, the historical poetry of certain men and women, the poetry of various periods in American history, or the poems characterizing American cities.

Grouping Historical Poetry

Regardless of the method used, some general introductory poetry could initiate the study of historical verse. Kenworthy stated that there were many good poems for this purpose. His favorites included Katherine Lee Bates' "America the Beautiful"; Stephen Vincent Benet's "Invocation," from his "John Brown's Body"; Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing"; Henry Van Dyke's "America for Me"; Sidney Lanier's "Dear Land of All My Love"; and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Building of the Ship."

Kenworthy recommended that a history of the United States in verse begin with poems about Native Americans. He gave as examples Longfellow's "The Song of Hiawatha," Lowell's "A Chippewa Legend," and Thackeray's "Pocahontas."

Kenworthy assured teachers that these poems would give students an accurate description of Native American life, even though the poems had some basis in myth and legend. Having studied Native American life through verse, teachers could turn next to the study of explorers through Lanier's "Columbus" and other similar poetry by Joaquin Miller and Annette Wynne and Longfellow's "Sir Humphrey Gilbert." Though based in part on legend, the quasi-historical "Courtship of Miles Standish" could follow, along with two selections on George Washington, Guiterman's "Young Washington" about Washington's trip to the French forts in 1753, and Lowell's "Washington" which, according to Kenworthy, gave broader treatment to the President's life.

Other poetry appropriate for the same time period would include Bryant's "The Green Mountain Boys," Wilson's "Ticonderoga," Emerson's "Concord Hymn," Lowell's "Concord Ode," and Sidney Lanier's "Battle of Lexington."

Having covered the early history of the eastern coastal area, Kenworthy next suggested that the teacher use historical verse to follow the pattern of western expansion. Students could read Walt Whitman's "Pioneers! Oh Pioneers!" Guiterman's "Daniel Boone," "The Oregon Trail," and "The Pioneer," Joaquin Miller's "Crossing the Plains," and Vachel Lindsay's "The Ghosts of the Buffaloes."

Leaving the poetry descriptive of the pioneer's encounters with Indians and the unknowns of nature behind, the teacher could turn next to the poems having to do with the conflict between the states over the slavery issue. Kenworthy recommended the poems of Longfellow and Whittier, including "Massachusetts to Virginia," "The Slave Ships," "The Slave in the Dismal Swamps," and "The Slave Singing at Midnight."

Teachers would find poems about the Civil War in great supply. Some of the better known poems would include Baker's "The Black Regiment," Read's "Sheridan's Ride," Thompson's "High Tide at Gettysburg," Pike's "Dixie," and Work's "Marching Through Georgia." Kenworthy noted that the poems about Lincoln alone could fill a volume.

Teachers might also use a few, less familiar themes to cover our later American history. Kenworthy noted that the type of poetry would change according to the topic studied.

Kenworthy characterized Vachel Lindsay's historical "Santa Fe Trail" and "General Booth Enters Into Heaven" as typical of a later type of American poetry. Carl Sandburg's "Chicago" was also identified as having some of the same characteristics. In "Chicago" Sandburg describes the large stockyards of the world. Indicative of the growth of urban areas and the industrialization of America are James S. Tippett's "Building a Skyscraper"

and Clara Lambert's "Skyscraper Is a City's House."

Kenworthy went on to identify the names of a few poets who had chosen either noteworthy historical figures or significant historical events as the subject for some of their poetry. These poets included Longfellow, Whittier, Guiterman, Miller, Lindsay, Sandburg, and Whitman. Kenworthy suggested class reports on these poets. Students could investigate why these poets would have an interest in a specific theme. Students could also determine the motivation of the poet in writing about a particular person or event. One other task might be for the student to determine the influence of the poet's writings on the thinking of the time period.

The study of American history and historical verse through the study of different time periods was another possible approach. Kenworthy suggested Discovery and Exploration, Colonization, the Revolution, National Development, Civil Conflict, Industrial Development, and Present-Day Life with the note that the poetry dealing with each time period would be plentiful and interesting. Of the time periods mentioned, Kenworthy believed that only the Civil War era had been unduly covered in the historical verse available.

Kenworthy was sure that other methods for the use of historical verse in American history would suggest themselves to those teachers who either already had knowledge of poetry or who had the interest, time, and resources to become knowledgeable. As one example, he said that students could get an interesting view of the megalopolis through reading Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Boston," Carl Sandburg's "Chicago," Amy Lowell's "St. Louis," Walt Whitman's "City of Ships," and Marguerite Weed's "New York."

Conclusion

Kenworthy noted that the use of historical verse in American history classes had all kinds of creative possibilities. Unlike the "Singing Geography" of the 1800s, teachers could use historical verse in a variety of ways. Only the teacher's limitations in interest and ingenuity could narrow the scope of application of historical verse in American history classes.

As a starter for teachers who were interested in reading some of the poems mentioned in his article, Kenworthy identified a few important works. Burton Stevenson's My Country was an American history in poetry with a prose narrative. His Great Americans As Seen by the Poets included poetry on presidents, statesmen, soldiers, sailors, writers, and adventurers. Other good books included Nellie Neurer Wallington's American History by American Poets and Rupert S. Holland's Historic Poems and Ballads.

An article or book written by Leonard S. Kenworthy is an article or book well worth reading. For more than fifty years, this well-known author, teacher educator, and respected classroom teacher has been helping teachers teach the social studies more effectively. Many of his ideas and activities for teaching the social studies from the 1930s are as relevant and useful today as they were when they were written. Kenworthy's ideas on the uses of historical verse in the teaching of American history are a case in point. Teachers will find these ideas of interest for their worth as an effective educational tool.

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Kenworthy, L.S. 1937. American History in Verse. The Clearing House 12 (November): 169-171.